

## Epilogue.

# Aesthetic Practices and Transcultural Art Histories

Epílogo. Prácticas estéticas e historias del arte transculturales

**Hannah Baader**

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, Firenze, Italia

Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin, Germany

*baader@khi.fi.it*

Debates on the era of globalization, postcolonial critique, and the Anthropocene have urged scholars working in the fields of Art History and Visual Culture to develop sharper analytical tools and new definitions for the study of art, artistic productions, and artifacts. With the ‘global turn’, Western distinctions between art and crafts, European notions of the exceptionality of the usually male artist, and universal concepts of art were no longer considered to have sufficient explanatory potential or considered convincing in their exclusiveness (Elkins 2007; Juneja 2018).

The need for new conceptualizations was and is pertinent not only to the field of the contemporary, with its apparently globalized exhibition cultures and art markets, but also to modern art, driven by recent insights in the plural history of modernity or Modernisms across the globe (Eisenstadt 2000; Juneja 2017). They are also needed in larger historical perspectives as well as in discussions on cultural heritage. The concept of ‘aesthetic practices’ has been promoted as a heuristic tool to overcome some of the shortcomings of highly elaborate, analytically strong, but often Western-centered art history. The term and concept of ‘aesthetic practices’ has been tested in a series of scholarly debates and in several case studies conducted by colleagues from a variety of disciplinary specializations, research areas, and art histories in a collaborative research program of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz and the Forum Transregionale Studien called “Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices”<sup>1</sup> co-directed by the author of these lines. This

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volume, edited by one of the participants in this endeavor, is part of an ongoing debate conducted across disciplines and institutions.

The set of questions studied in the program concerns often underestimated aesthetic entanglements, inversions, and permeations in contact or conflict zones, in the constitution of centers, and in so-called peripheries. It opens up to transcultural or transregional perspectives across time and space. It invites scholars to study artifacts in their transfers and transformations and looks beyond the elaboration of national perspectives on materials that predate nation building. It challenges given periodizations, as well as the notion of regions and other geographical imaginations (Lewis and Wigen 1997). It is directed toward the understanding of the dynamics of the making and use of images, but also looks into the makings and uses of objects, architectures, and the formations and transformation of environments. This includes the history of the preservation, display, and musealization of artifacts, as well as their reinstallation or their destruction. The study of aesthetic practices is based on linguistic, terminological, and cognitive considerations, and includes social, gender, legal, religious, technical, philosophical, and ecological studies, as well as the history of science. Speaking of 'aesthetic practices' should enable scholars to ask in new ways about the role of the visual arts and of artistic practices in the making, transformation, and connectivity of communities, regions, cultures and ecologies, and subjectivities.

The concept of 'aesthetic practices' combines two terms that allude to two distinct and rather separated discursive fields: philosophy on the one hand, sociology on the other. This works against a disciplinary isolation of art histories and visual studies and tries to bring them into a dialogue with related fields, including anthropology and archaeology. At the same time, the juxtaposition and combination of the two terms creates a tension between two methodological poles, which allows us to overcome or move between dichotomies such as theory and practice, body and mind, the social and the single.

Investigating artistic productions and artifacts from a praxeological point of view means to study them in processual, temporal dimensions and in relation to, but not in dependence on social practices, economy, politics, or religion. The concept builds on the praxeological turn that dates back to the 1970s. Pierre Bourdieu initiated the insistence on practices in his seminal book on *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). The philosopher Theodor Schatzki (Schatzki 1996; Schatzki and Knorr 2001; Schatzki, Hui, and Shove 2017) and others further developed and theorized it. Their aim was to understand societies and groups, but also individuals, through their actions, rather than through structures. In this context, practices are considered those entities of the social that are not necessarily brought into 'discourse'. The then new focus on practices allowed various disciplines to move beyond dualisms, especially those of object and subject, and to highlight non-propositional forms of knowledge. Within the field of plural art histories, an interest in practices can rely on a strong debate about the social embeddedness or social life of art and on the biography of objects (Appadurai 1986; Shalem 2005). It can connect to controversies about the agency of things (Gell 1998; Latour 2005; see also Baader and Weinryb 2016), but also goes beyond them.

Indeed, the concept of ‘aesthetic practices’ does not end with these notions; it also relates to aesthetics, a philosophical concept connected to sensuality and perception. Since modernity, aesthetics has often been understood in terms of aesthetization and has been strongly criticized. In fact, aesthetics in modernity seems to find its place everywhere and nowhere (Reckwitz 2016). At the same time, scholars have stressed the emancipatory capacities of aesthetic experience and education (Spivak 2012). They have described the arts – not only visual arts – as a form of practical reflection. Philosophers and theoreticians alike have insisted on the transformative powers of aesthetics (Bertram 2014; Fischer-Lichte 2008; 2018), offering not only pleasure, but also reflection and autonomy. The concept of aesthetics therefore can be considered in terms of its insight into transformative potentials, and as a critical tool in the analysis of social processes, also within transcultural dynamics, taking into account “the ecologies of others” (Descola 2013). If conceived in praxeological terms and tested in a plurality of fields, working with a notion of aesthetics might be a tool to understand processes of creativity and their possible social dimensions in broader perspectives – those of making as well as those of perception, transformation, and use.

Under these premises, combining the study of practices and aesthetics can also help in the recent discussions on materiality and the many visual and non-visual experiments that can be related to materials (see Apter *et al.* 2016). This goes far beyond the notion of ‘material culture’ and concepts of ‘making’ that are sometimes nostalgically informed (Ingold 2013). While looking into materiality, the study of ‘aesthetic practices’ can go beyond concepts of representation (cf. Wolf 2019) and invite scholars to work on the relation between practices and production, discourses and transformations, translations and materialities. This may lead to intriguing discussions of modes of emancipation, commodification, or normativity.

Terminologies, linguistic and aesthetic concepts, translations and transformations, and rituals are recurrent topics in the essays addressed in this volume. It is part of an opening and reconceptualizing of the disciplinary field of (plural) art histories and visual culture studies. As a collaborative endeavor, the essays in this volume look into various forms and problems of aesthetic practices within, among, and beyond indigenous visual cultures. The contributions invite readers to think through the Indigenous visual cultures of the Americas, past and present. Their aim is to open new and fruitful discussions across disciplines and among scholars and to incite a critical engaging with artistic and aesthetic processes and productions, historical and contemporary.

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